File Diocese

DIOCESE OF PENNSYLVANIA

Reconciliation Program

REPORT OF SECOND
TASK GROUP ON
HOUSING

As Accepted By
Diocesan Council
March 1972

March 9, 1972

To Diocesan Council Members:

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The Second Generation Task Group on Racial Subordination in Housing found the preparation of its report frustrating, irritating and a partial indictment of the Task Group process.

We were frustrated by the lack of diversity in our small group — no low income blacks or whites — no clergy and no young people.

We were irritated that most of the housing steps we discussed — and that others have advocated — are merely Band-Aids on a cancer. Nothing short of uprooting American ideals, customs, traditions and local laws will bring any meaningful amelioration of the housing problem. To suggest otherwise is to mislead the Diocese and the public at large. This being so, we concluded that a "Task" Group constituted as ours was may merely give the illusion of action or accomplishment. It may only serve as false catharsis for idealistic individuals, or provide an excuse or conscience sop for both individuals and a diocese.

We saw no hard evidence that either the Diocese or individual parishes had followed prior Task Group recommendations.

Under such circumstances, a "Task" Group may actually be dangerous or immoral, and is certainly not in keeping with the Christian imperative.

We are attaching as an Appendix the more lengthy report we attempted to write, for illustrative purposes only. We do not give permission for its promulgation as our report unless qualified and accompanied by this letter.

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APPENDIX

Shelter is basic to survival. Yet in this Diocese in 1972 thousands of our fellow citizens are housed inadequately. For various reasons tens of thousands are denied opportunities for better housing. The problem is not going away; indeed, it seems to be getting steadily worse.

Apathy hangs over housing reform like a cloud. As somebody said in another context: "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." Because we wanted to be counted as "part of the solution", we agreed to serve on this Task Group. At the outset, we were told that our Group, the second to study housing, would be "very diverse" and that it would probably number about 20. Such was not the case. We never had as many as 15 attenders, not even at the first organization meeting. After a few weeks our group shook down to 9 or 10 regulars who attended most of the time. All but two were middle-class white suburbanites. Of the others, one was a middle-class white from a blue-stocking city neighborhood and the second was a middle-class black educator who lives in the city and works outside. All of us could probably be classified as church "liberals" or at least "moderates". Two high school students started with us but quickly dropped out. As a result, our group contained no young people, no old people, no poor, no clergy and no conservatives.

Surely, Diocesan officials sought to recruit a more representative group, but their failure to do so raises questions. Was their effort half-hearted? By this time has the Diocese itself become apathetic about housing task groups? Or was apathy limited to the "no shows" — those who originally agreed to serve but never came? Alternatively, must those of us who stuck it out take responsibility for failing to hold the interest and attendance of some who quit after one or two meetings? Whatever went wrong, the fact that we had such problems shows how deepseated and pervasive is housing apathy in our Diocese and in the community at large. There is a lesson here.

There is a different kind of lesson in the reaction of a black woman, a college graduate who had once lived on public assistance. She was invited to join our group but attended only one meeting. She wasn't apathetic about housing; from personal experience she knew more about the problem than any of us and she cared as much or more about finding solutions. She was simply convinced that church committees – perhaps committees of any kind – are a waste of time. "I'm going to Weight Watchers", she said, in explaining why she couldn't attend our meeting. "I *know* that will do some good."

Her reaction may have had something to do with the conclusion that a majority of us soon reached. This was that while talk was cheap we ought to DO something. Or, as one member put it: "The problem of providing adequate housing cannot be resolved by people sitting around talking about it." The first action we took was to send letters to all parishes asking for support of legislation that would end the "lien requirement" for public housing recipients who own property. Pennsylvania law currently requires homeowners, as a condition of qualifying for public assistance, to agree to have liens placed on their homes. Then if the individual relief recipient sells his house the Commonwealth has a prior claim to the proceeds of the sale. Theoretically, it can collect an amount equal to the sum of all the money it has paid the recipient in public assistance. We considered this regulation demeaning and discriminatory. It has kept thousands of people who need and could qualify for public assistance off the welfare rolls because of their fear of the "lien law".

Our decision to push for amending the lien law was taken hastily – too hastily in the view of one member of the Group who subsequently pointed out that we backed the weaker of two bills having approximately the same desired effect. However, our haste reflected our frustration and our impatience to start tackling what we saw as monstrous housing inequities.

After this one foray as an "action group", though, we settled down to more conventional committee work. Though scarcely a representative or heterogeneous group, we found ourselves disagreeing sharply with one another on aims, procedures, goals. While a majority appeared to favor the action orientation, a strong minority was more interested in probing such philosophical matters as the nature of prejudice. Our Chairman, who sympathized with both points of view, put it this way:

"I believe that the Church must always address itself to the deep underlying questions of life. At the same time I feel that since people are cold, poor, homeless or ill housed *now*, Christian people must also work to alleviate problems at all levels and in many ways. Certainly education to change attitudes counts, but legislation to change behavior with attitudes following as a result of action is of equal importance."

We spent many meetings seeking to educate ourselves. At one of these meetings we watched a film called "Black and White Uptight", which explored the subject of racial prejudice. In the discussion which followed we discovered that half the group present felt that prejudice is an inherent condition and the other half that it is a learned behavior. One of our members felt that this was a major breakthrough in our education and had this statement to make:

"As long as there is this ideological place for a certain amount of prejudice to hide in us, why have Task Groups on any other subject at all? Here is a root cause of racial disunity in our Society and it has such a long tap root that it goes straight down to the roots of everything else with which we concern ourselves. I respectfully request that a Task Group to study whether distrust of our brothers and sisters is or is not a learned behavior be formed as soon as possible. I believe it is urgent."

With the Whitman housing controversy in South Philadelphia still raging, we talked to residents just north of Whitman in a section called Pennsport, where a similar project was being scuttled. Besides the racial implications in both developments, we came to comprehend – if not sympathize with – the anger of working class residents (white) forced to accept the fact that other people (black) of lower income would be owning homes that they themselves could not afford. We saw no way out of this dilemma. One member noted: "The government subsidies that enable ownership for the poor mean that people of moderate income also help to pay for these (subsidized) houses with their taxes. One does not have to agree to understand the emotions involved."

We looked more generally at housing problems throughout the region. We found these stumbling blocks to the development of adequate housing for all:

1. Suburban communities zone out the poor and the black. They do this not simply because of racism – although racism is certainly a factor – but because of their tax structure. As long as school districts and municipalities depend for their survival almost exclusively on local property taxes it is in their self

interest to keep out poor people who often require more in services than they pay for in taxes.

2. The lack of an effective regional planning agency with teeth.

3. The lack of commitment on the part of government at the local, regional, state or national level to implement the concept of "open housing".

4. The lack of genuine commitment and involvement on the part of churches, including the Episcopal Church, in the field of housing.

5. Racism – both overt and subtle.

6. Public apathy.

7. The scarcity of black real estate men in the suburbs.

8. The continuing influence on thinking of the so-called Protestant work ethic. From Whitman Park to Paoli and beyond the "haves" cling to the notion that the "have-nots" should only be allowed shelter that they work and pay for.

9. A breakdown in communications which often prevents information concerning availibility of housing from reaching those who need it.

10. Simple ignorance concerning housing subsidies on the part of people who should know better. Middle-class homeowners often bitterly oppose federal housing subsidies for low- or moderate-income families. They fail to recognize that their own houses are heavily subsidized – through the device of federal income tax deductions for mortgage interest payments.

11. Blindness on the part of the Federal Housing Administration. For years the FHA would guarantee mortgages only in "safe" neighborhoods – i.e. middle-class white ones, generally in the suburbs. Its policies were liberalized only after the damage was done.

12. The negative impact of local self-determination. "Community control" of schools and local government is currently a popular rallying cry of radicals and others seeking social change. But in the suburbs of Philadelphia, residents of boroughs and townships do in fact control their communities and they stubbornly resist change of any kind.

The solutions and actions favored by members of our Task Group range widely. There was no consensus. Here are some of the reactions:

1. "Nothing short of uprooting American ideals, customs, traditions and local laws will bring any meaningful answer to adequate housing for all. A local piecemeal approach will never resolve any of the housing needs."

2. "The fact is that the housing pinch is both economic and racial. There is virtually no (new) housing under $30,000 in this Diocese, be it for white, black or speckled. There is no rental housing for families with incomes under $11,000, incredible as that may seem. These are People problems . . . And possibly the thing that will move People to action is the realization that their own children will have no apartments to study in and no houses to bring babies home from hospitals to because no housing for that income level is being built."

3. "The first thing we must recognize is that this is a problem we ALL face as Americans. If we look back over the history of the founding of our country we will note that most groups that came did so because they were minorities or were oppressed in their own European countries. They had to overcome many difficulties and obstacles here and many are still considered 'minority groups'. In a Reconciliation Program we should be stressing similarities and building up from there."

4. "Values must be changed. We need action by communities, Federal and State courts and legislators to make changes and see that imaginative planning takes place."

5. "Jobs and workers housing and commuting must be related. No corporation hiring many workers should move to a suburban community where the housing market is closed."

6. "Radical changes of the tax system for financing education must be sought."

7. "Non-profit organizations should be negotiating for tracts of land in the suburbs."

8. "People should be educated to the problem."

9. "An ecumenical Fair Housing Committee for Philadelphia and suburbs is needed. The problem is too great for any single denomination to deal with effectively."

10. Pressure must be used to force developers to include in housing projects units for low- and moderate-income families. This pressure may need to take the form of direct action, including demands on planning commissions and zoning boards to require inclusion of a variety of housing. That failing, we should be prepared to lie down in front of bulldozers that are clearing land for projects that exclude lower-income groups. And we should seek to obtain for such demonstrations the participation of some of the most prominent and affluent Episcopalians in the Diocese.